

Future of Journalism: BBC staff bare all

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It's always fun at BBC White City. They can assemble more talent for a staff conference on the future of journalism than most media organisations have to run their actual operations. And then the lifts don't work.

It was clear from this [College of Journalism](#) gathering that the BBC has moved on apace in its use of new media throughout production. It is now generally past the early adoption phase ("it's not real journalism", "I am too old to change") and into the exciting expansion phase.

Mid-life crisis

But with digital middle age comes a few mid-new-media life crises. There is obviously a huge challenge for BBC editorial management in making this all work. And there is clearly an issue about how the BBC journalists cope with losing control over the editorial process as the speed and complexity of production increases and the public gets more involved.

Environment and Science correspondent [David Shukman](#) spoke with huge enthusiasm about his multi-platformed life. It is 'fun and rewarding' he said. He has a few issues with news desks that expect too much of him, but what's new about that for a reporter in the field?

One million hits

Shukman recognised that more platforms mean that he and his producers have to become multi-skilled and more adept at sharing the work-load and handling the requests for material. But he realises that priorities will change:

"When you realise that a piece of video on the website might get one million hits, well that's significant compared to, say, the audience for News 24".

Fellow correspondent [Jeremy Cooke](#) was also enthusiastic. As a skillful and experienced broadcaster from a traditional mould he actually finds some parts of the new media world easier. He has no problem turning out what he calls 'rants', the one or two minute, one or two take 'as live' videos where the correspondent spiels about the story s/he is covering.

Doubts about digital

He was honest, though, with his doubts about other consequences of doing more in different ways.

"What happens to the quality of the reporting when the story is breaking and you are under pressure? Will there be a new generation of foot soldiers while if you want to be 'top end' you have to come in at a different level?"

The equipment is certainly there to make this happen. [Live Editor Guy Pelham](#) waved around all sorts of boxes that makes it possible to be on air and online from around the world. We are 'faster, smaller and lighter' he said. (I wish I could say the same...):

| “That means we can broadcast from more places, in better quality and with lower costs”

New media, new problems

That simple set of facts is vital to understanding the new economics of media production. But that doesn't make editorial management simpler. I got the impression that the BBC's new simplified, stream-lined news gathering and production processes are still bedding in. They have incorporated online properly but they have not resolved all the problems of processing diverse material for various platforms.

As Guy Pelham said, “tough decisions have to happen here not in the field”.

This is not such a problem for smaller media groups like ITN, as ITV's clever online producer [Zoe Smith](#) explained.

| “We don't have a news channel to worry about, so our website is our 24 hour outlet. We will make use of online video but we are also going to do so much more with platforms like Twitter or social networking sites like Facebook.”

Multi-media wholesale

And for a wire agency like PA there is the relative simplicity of being what their multi-media editor [John Angeli](#) called a 'wholesale' operation. They are multi-skilled and offer material for multi-platforms, but they don't have to do the final packaging and distribution.

I love this grappling with new media production possibilities. It is what my book [SuperMedia](#) is all about. It is where the journalism meets the technology and wins.

But that technology is not standing still. The BBC's multi-media man [Pete Clifton](#) showcased some in-development online projects that could help harness the software to improve the BBC's digitally-driven journalism.

New tools for new times

These production tools included:

| *News Central: a website where journalists can search for everything made by the BBC about a particular issue or person – to cross the 'silos' and see and share the BBC's wealth of information*

| *Journalist Portal: an online space where they can put all the orders of the day, legal notices, contacts etc*

| *Sat Mapping Trucks: an online mapping tool to let newsdesks visualise what their production vehicles are doing, where they are, what stories they are covering etc*

| *Video search and distribution site: somewhere for all the video to be stored centrally so it can be used and moved around without tapes or feeds*

Metadata: dull but important

But the big one by my reckoning was a plan to incorporate much more metadata in to all BBC news material. This sounds incredibly boring, and inputting it probably will be.

In simple terms it means adding, say, 25 'tags' or descriptors to each bit of material or story. Where was it shot? what is in it? etc

It will allow all sorts of clever things to be done. Putting metadata around stories and material improves the search and collation of that material. And it means many clever connecting and sorting things can be done automatically.

It will allow journalists to access information and material but it will also allow different audiences to connect to different bits of data or packages as well.

Go connect

It has some very practical applications for connection geographical and mobile telecommunications platforms for example, such as news on mobiles.

It also has some other interesting possibilities if the BBC was to share it with other journalists, researchers or other public agencies. That requires a degree of standardisation of the way that data is collected, but that shouldn't be beyond the talent on display today.

Now all we need is for the College to put today's deliberations online as well. (coming soon I am told – see comments to this post)

You can read Paul Bradshaw's thoughts [here](#). ♦

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